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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRIN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: VUJANOVIC HITCHES
CAMPAIGN WAGON TO DJUKANOVIC'S STAR

REF: PODGORICA 106 AND PREVIOUS

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Filip Vujanovic of the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) is the clear front-runner in the Montenegrin presidential election, set for April 6. Intent on a first-round victory, the low-key Vujanovic's biggest challenge is to mobilize DPS members and sympathizers, many of whom lobbied for party leader and current PM Djukanovic to run. Vujanovic can count on the DPS's formidable political machine to get out many voters, and as a recent visit to a campaign rally attested, is seeking to link his candidacy with Montenegrin statehood and emphasize his close relations with DPS favorite Djukanovic. END SUMMARY.

Vujanovic Stakes Big Lead...

12. (U) Incumbent President Vujanovic enjoys a huge lead in the polls. According to a March 14-20 survey by the CEDEM think-tank, 52.8 percent of likely voters support his candidacy (up from 49.5 percent in February). His closest challenger, currently Serbian People's Party leader Andrija Mandic, has only 19.8 percent support.

...But Generating Enthusiasm Remains Main Challenge

13. (SBU) Vujanovic represents Montenegro's strongest party (in power for 17-plus years) and has a relatively clean image, low negative ratings, and a history of reaching out to minorities (and Serbs). But DPS stalwarts worry that he lacks the charisma to energize voters and mobilize the DPS base in an election in which Montenegrin statehood is not at stake and all candidates profess support for European integration. (Note: Some Montenegrin nationalists also see Vujanovic, who patronizes the Serbian Orthodox Church, as soft on issues related to Montenegrin identity.) While few doubt his ultimate victory, the DPS wants to avoid a second electoral round, which would embolden the opposition and draw public attention to policy differences, and many in the party originally lobbied for DPS leader and current PM Milo Djukanovic to run. The very fact of DPS dominance and Vujanovic's substantial lead may work against

him: if victory is inevitable, why should those who voted for the DPS in the past -- perhaps to support Montenegrin independence -- bother to go the polls now?

Seeking Support From All Montenegrins...

14. (SBU) Vujanovic's Chief of Staff Ivan Lekovic told us the President sought to mobilize voters by meeting as many of them as possible in visits to all 21 municipalities. While not targeting particular voter groups or swing regions, Vujanovic is adjusting his message to address local concerns. In poorer northern municipalities, Vujanovic has focused on economic and infrastructure development (and specific local issues like promising municipal status to the township of Gusinje) and downplayed the DPS's role in securing independence, while on the more prosperous Montenegrin coast he talked about managing development. Continued European integration and the importance of stability have been common themes in all municipalities, Lekovic said.

...But Counting On The DPS Machine

15. (SBU) Vujanovic has the advantage of incumbency -- he has been busy opening schools and handing out awards -- and enjoys more coverage on state media than his rivals. The DPS hopes Djukanovic's accession to PM will energize supporters, as will good feelings from the independence referendum. Finally and perhaps most importantly, the DPS's deep coffers are paying for

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ubiquitous TV spots and billboards, and the party is counting on its formidable patronage machine to get out the vote (we heard the DPS deployed 4,500 activists in Podgorica, each charged with talking to at least 30 voters per day).

Love-Fest in Niksic...For Milo

16. (SBU) Energy and enthusiasm were very much in evidence at a Vujanovic rally we attended in Niksic on March 29. A diverse crowd of over a thousand packed the hall, with many standing in the aisles. The families of Vujanovic, Djukanovic, and former PM Sturanovic are from Niksic; all three politicians attended the event (along with Parliament Speaker Ranko Krivokapic of the allied Social Democrats), which felt like a homecoming.

17. (SBU) The focus of the audience's attention and adoration, however, was not Vujanovic. Rather, the party faithful swooned over Djukanovic. The PM entered the hall (with Vujanovic) to chants of "Milo, Milo," which were to be repeated any time a speaker mentioned Djukanovic (and sometimes even when they did not). The crowd did yell Vujanovic's name, but much less frequently. When Djukanovic took the stage, the audience rose to its feet, cell phone cameras clicking. When Vujanovic spoke, half remained seated and a couple of people even made for the exits. (Note: Apparently seeking to turn the spotlight back on Vujanovic, Djukanovic stressed that he had never made a

political decision without consulting Vujanovic and that securing a "European future" for Montenegro required a team effort.)

¶8. (SBU) The crowd's enthusiasm also was for Montenegrin statehood. Montenegrin flags festooned the gallery, Montenegrin folk songs warmed up the audience (which frequently broke into nationalist chants), and Montenegrin independence -- and specifically the fact that DPS leaders had passed the independence referendum over opposition from Vujanovic's rivals -- was the main theme of the evening, highlighted by almost every speaker. Djukanovic in particular devoted much of his speech to systematically attacking the other presidential candidates for opposing independence (he also said Vujanovic's reelection was important for Montenegro's European integration prospects, continued economic growth, and stability in a transitional period).

¶9. (SBU) Vujanovic used his speech, which was brief but punctuated by vigorous hand gestures, to praise Niksic for its anti-fascist credentials and support for Montenegrin independence. He said that during his first term as President he had fulfilled most of his campaign promises -- Montenegro had achieved independence (which he said his rivals opposed) and was internationally recognized ("if my opponents had their way we would not be in these international organizations"), and he had supported minority rights and worked to reduce unemployment and raise wages and pension. Montenegro was now well on its way toward Europe, and Vujanovic hoped to see the process through during a second term.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Backed by the DPS political machine and opposed by an internally divided opposition, Vujanovic's eventual victory does not appear to be in serious question. But it remains to be seen whether he can deliver a first-round knockout. A low-key personality, his biggest challenge is to energize DPS members and sympathizers in an election which by rights should not be about the emotional issue of independence -- which has been settled -- or about Montenegro's orientation -- which all candidates agree is toward Europe. As the Niksic rally attests, Vujanovic is doing his best to both re-inject independence and Montenegrin nationalism (even though he is not seen as its strongest proponent by some) into the campaign in areas where it is favored and to link himself to the wildly popular (with DPS supporters) Djukanovic. While stressing European integration,

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economic improvements, stability, and local issues, his main message seems to be, "we brought you statehood, and I'll work with Milo to strengthen Montenegro," or simply, "I'm with Milo."
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